

# **JONI GOES POSTAL**

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## ABSTRACT

*Joni Goes Postal* is a feature film comedic screenplay. The story tracks the emotional journey of Joni, a 34- year-old postal worker who discovers that her long-term boyfriend cheated on her. Stuck in a dead-end job, confronted with overwhelming feelings of anger, betrayal and loss, Joni is jolted out of complacency and forced to confront her own fears and insecurities as she struggles to find new meaning and purpose in her life. The story examines a break-up, and explores concepts of love, loss, grief, and obsession.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
 OVERVIEW .....	 1
Introduction.....	1
Origins.....	2
Previous Work .....	4
ELEMENTS.....	7
Genre.....	7
Tone .....	10
Theme .....	11
A Note on Obsession .....	12
World of the Story .....	17
STORYTELLING.....	19
Creative Process.....	19
Structure.....	22
Structural Breakdown .....	24
ACT 1.....	24
ACT 2.....	26
ACT 3.....	30
Characters .....	32
 CLOSING THOUGHTS.....	 45
 BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	 49
FILMOGRAPHY .....	51

## OVERVIEW

### Introduction

*Breaking Up is Hard to Do*

Neil Sedaka

A computer search for “getting over a break-up” yields 881,000,000 Google hits. Amazon.com lists 283 books on the subject. 1,370 websites are devoted to the not yet medically recognized “obsessive ex syndrome.” If breaking up were easy, this would not be the case. Countless advice columns would not exist, millions of country and western songs would never have been written, and therapists would have to moonlight to make ends meet.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross & David Kessler define five stages of grief when dealing with a loss. These are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Grieving for a break-up – as opposed to a death – can be further complicated by feelings of betrayal, blame, guilt, and a desire for revenge. The fact that the other person is still alive, and the potentiality for reconciliation exists, adds further fuel to the fire.

*Joni Goes Postal* deals with one woman’s breakup, and her struggle to get through the resulting turmoil and come out the other side. This is particularly traumatic for the protagonist since it was her most serious relationship, one she hoped would lead to marriage, a family, and “happily-ever-after.” Now Joni must also face the fact that these dreams may never become a reality. She still has time to have a family, but the window is closing and her future is not so sure. Joni must go through the stages of grief to get over her heartbreak. It is not easy, but it is only in doing so that she can experience growth and begin to heal.

## Origins

*The heart was made to be broken.*

Oscar Wilde

The origin of this story (full disclosure here) was from personal experience. I worked at the post office for a number of years, and went through a very painful break-up at the time. I desperately wanted to rise above the situation, to put it behind me, get on with my life. But my psyche and emotions sabotaged me every step of the way. I both loved and hated the person who had broken my heart. There were periods of doubt, sadness and pain, interspersed with hope that we would get back together, that the future would be better, that happiness would appear in some new and unexpected way.

According to Kübler-Ross,<sup>1</sup> the stages of grief are not linear. A person doesn't go through feelings of betrayal, and then graduate to blame. This was my experience. I went through all the stages of grief, not in a linear, clearly-defined way, but rather like a pinball, bouncing back and forth, shooting all over the place, often circling back to a stage I thought I had left behind. This fuelled my desire to explore the period of time immediately following a break-up in an authentic way.

Several excellent films revolve around the disintegration of relationships (*The Puffy Chair*, *Before Midnight*). But in these stories the break occurs at the end of the movie, and little screen time is given to the aftermath.

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<sup>1</sup> Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and David Kessler. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*. New York: Scribner, 2007.

*The Break Up* is an exception, in that it deals with the period of time immediately following a failed relationship. However, the movie was a broad comedy, and failed to convey emotions in an authentic way. The characters don't go through the grief process. Instead, they spend their time playing games. Gary (Vince Vaughn) hires hookers to join him in a strip poker game to make Brooke (Jennifer Aniston) jealous; she invites a series of dates to their apartment because, even though she broke up with Gary, she wants him to realize what he's missing and beg her to take him back. Roger Ebert says the characters are "sadistic meanies" and that the movie lacks "warmth, optimism, or insight into human nature."<sup>2</sup> I wanted to create a post-break-up story with characters that were more complex and truthful, who dealt with the situation in a more realistic way.

With this in mind, I set out to create the screenplay *Joni Goes Postal*. This contextualizing document will discuss specific elements of the story, including genre, theme, tone, structure, and character, as well as the creative process of going from seed idea to finished script. Finally, I will add thoughts about the future development of *Joni Goes Postal*, and how it fits into the realm of Canadian cinema.

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<sup>2</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Review: The Break Up," <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-break-up-2006>.

## Previous Work

*Just because a relationship ends, it doesn't mean it's not worth having.*

Sarah Mlynowski

In the past, I have written thrillers, dramas, and romantic comedy. Some of my previous work is summarized below.

*Obituary* is a thriller that was produced as a television movie-of-the-week (MOW) by Chesler Perlmutter Productions and aired on Lifetime, Global TV, and the Women's Network. The protagonist, Denise Wilcox (Josie Bissett), a frustrated reporter delegated to writing an Obituary Column, begins receiving obituaries of people *before* they are brutally murdered. Denise becomes obsessed, questioning her own perceptions and reality in the process. When she receives her own obituary, she must fight not only for her sanity, but for her life as well.

*To Earn a Home* is a drama that was written in conjunction with Telefilm Canada. The story centres around Evelyn Wolfe, a drug-addicted mother of two, who takes her sons on a joyride in a stolen car. The ride turns to disaster when the oldest son is shot and killed. Evelyn is sentenced to prison, and her youngest son (Ben) is placed in foster care. Depressed, lonely, and overcome with guilt, Evelyn signs up to work in the kennel program, which rehabilitates dogs that have been severely traumatized and abused. She is assigned to work with Timber, a husky cross with mangy fur and leery eyes who crouches in the corner of his crate, terrified. Slowly Evelyn begins to break down the barriers that both she and Timber have built up against the world. In doing so, she is able to let go of her past and find the courage to guide Ben towards a better life.



*Honeymoon in Rome* was my first attempt at writing a romantic comedy. The story is about a young couple, Darlene and Dave, who think they have found the love of their lives and are in the midst of planning their wedding. But things go awry when Dave books their honeymoon a month before the wedding, with no cancellation insurance. Not only that, but instead of going to Rome, Italy, they end up in Rome, New York. Throughout it all, Dave and Darlene discover that they are fundamentally different from each other and end up questioning whether they should get married at all.

I am not a writer who is pinned down by genre, subject matter, or theme. Instead, I tend to agree with Julia Cameron when she says, “the singular image is what haunts us and becomes art.”<sup>3</sup> Often there is a singular image, or an idea, which grips me and won’t let go. I still don’t understand why this happens, but when it does, I know it is a story I have to pursue.

Yet despite the differences in my past work, there are some similarities. For example, most of the protagonists I have written about are obsessed. I have long been fascinated with the idea of obsession, the way that something can take hold of us and not let go. It can be a goal (*Obituary*), a chemical dependency (*To Earn a Home*), or an ideal (Darlene’s obsession with having a perfect wedding in *Honeymoon in Rome*). Also, I usually write about female protagonists. This is not a conscious choice; it just happens that most of the characters I feel drawn to happen to be female. These two elements are found in *Joni Goes Postal*. However, this script departs from my previous work in several ways.

*Joni Goes Postal* was the first script I wrote based on a personal experience. This created numerous challenges. It was an experience that was, at times, painful for me to explore. I struggled with distancing myself from the actual events, in order to create characters and

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<sup>3</sup> Cameron, Julia. *The Artist’s Way*. 10th ed. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2002.

situations that would best serve the emerging story. I needed to create characters that were different from those in real life, and to give them each a unique voice. Robert McKee says it is necessary to “love all your characters,”<sup>4</sup> but that can be difficult when some were loosely based on people who had hurt me. It took several drafts before I was able to even begin to do this. However, as I kept working at it, the characters began to emerge with a personality of their own, and I began to understand and empathize with each of them. The storyline, too, changed drastically. As a result, the script bears little resemblance to actual events.

Another departure was that *Joni Goes Postal* is a screenplay that was written based on an internal journey, rather than on external events. According to Syd Field, “In a screenplay, either the character drives the action, or the action drives the character.” My previous scripts had always revolved around the later model. I would create a plot first, and then develop characters that could fit into these events.

I first attempted to write *Joni Goes Postal* in this manner, but it didn’t work. I then realized that, because this is a character-driven story, I needed to work in reverse. I went back to the drawing board and traced Joni’s emotional state, which was often messy and painful, and the plot evolved out of this. This was a learning process for me. It was incredibly frustrating at times, and I often felt out of my depth. However, I feel a stronger script was created in the end.

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<sup>4</sup> McKee, Robert. *Story*. London: Methuen, 1998.

## ELEMENTS

### Genre

*What is the opposite of two? A lonely me, a lonely you.*

Richard Wilbur

I watched a lot of movies while in the process of writing *Joni Goes Postal*. Many of these are ones that can be regarded as romantic comedies. I am inspired by films such as *Annie Hall*, *Moonstruck*, *When Harry Met Sally*, and more recent additions to the genre such as *Silver Linings Playbook*, *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck*. All of these films have unique characters, distinct tones, diverse themes, and interesting plots, and all offer unique perspectives of characters as they negotiate the pitfalls of finding true love. However, even though *Joni Goes Postal* is a comedy and is about a romance, I don't feel it belongs specifically to this genre.

Romantic comedies usually follow a specific trajectory: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back.<sup>5</sup> Billy Mernit, a script consultant who worked on *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck*, and the author of *Writing the Romantic Comedy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001) states that movies belonging to this genre are essentially courtship stories. "What the romantic comedy does is simply replicate that natural progression: meeting, getting involved, seeing what those issues are, dealing with those issues, and then, after the trust has been established, making that commitment. And then most romantic comedies conveniently end at the point when the real stuff starts."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan, Stephen V. *Genre Screenwriting: How to Write Popular Screenplays That Sell*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Hogan, Brianne. "Billy Mernit on Writing the Romantic Comedy," <http://creativescreenwriting.com/billy-mernit-on-writing-the-romantic-comedy>

Some movies start with a break up, but can still be considered romantic comedies. That's because, after the initial heartbreak, the protagonist goes on to the next phase of his or her life—and another romance. The story line then follows the familiar “boy meets girl” trajectory. The break up is merely the inciting incident to this new love story.

In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Peter (Jason Segel) is dumped by Sarah (Kristen Bell), the woman he considers the love of his life. He goes to Hawaii for a vacation, and happens to end up at the same resort as Sarah and her new boyfriend. Peter soon finds himself falling for Rachel (Mila Kunis), who works at the resort. His ex serves as the obstacle to this new romance, and the cause of the “boy loses girl” segment of the screenplay. But the obstacle is overcome, Peter realizes Rachel is his true love, and the two live happily ever after.

*Addicted to Love* begins with Sam (Matthew Broderick) deeply in love with Linda (Kelly Preston). When Linda goes away to teach, and meets another man, Sam moves to the town where she is living, and squats in an abandoned building across the street, intending to spy on his ex and find a way to win her back. His plans are derailed when Maggie (Meg Ryan) shows up with a similar plan—to spy on her ex, who just happens to be the man Linda is in love with. Thus, Sam and Maggie meet. And wouldn't you know it? They fall in love, break up, and realize that their soulmates are not their exes, but each other.

There is a small subset of movies that can be considered anti-romantic comedies. These movies deal with disintegrating relationships, where love doesn't triumph, and the protagonists often end up alone at the end, such as *The Puffy Chair*, *Before Sunset*, and *The Break-Up*.

*The Break-Up* begins with Brooke (Jennifer Aniston) and Gary (Vince Vaughn) meeting, a quick scene followed by a montage of them falling in love and moving in together. But it soon becomes apparent that the relationship isn't working, and the two break up. Because they co-own

an apartment in Chicago, and neither of them wants to move out, they continue living together, while driving each other crazy. In the end, the break up is complete, and they both move on with their lives. They have not reconciled, and neither has found another love.

Perhaps *Joni Goes Postal* best fits into this subgroup of anti-romantic comedies. However, I wrote several drafts of the script before I encountered the term. My choices came not from attempting to adhere to a genre, but from trying to honour the story I wanted to tell.

I wanted to examine the aftermath of a relationship. I also wanted Joni to end up single at the end. Although movies like *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* are entertaining, it bothers me that the underlying message seems to be that salvation for a broken heart comes in the form of a new relationship. I felt it was important for Joni to experience her loss and grief, to learn and grow from it, and to embrace life, regardless of her relationship status.

However, unlike other movies referenced here, *Joni Goes Postal* is unique in that it is told through the point-of-view of a single protagonist. We see the world through Joni's eyes. Richard is not given equal screen time because, as happens in real life, once a break up occurs, we don't know very much about what is going on in the ex-partner's life. While the focus is initially on Joni's relationship with Richard, it is ultimately on her relationship with herself.

## Tone

*The song is ended but the melody lingers on...*

Irving Berlin

Establishing the tone of *Joni Goes Postal* created challenges. In early drafts, I received feedback that I was writing for comedic effect. I was reminded that comedy should come from real situations, emotions, and motives, in order to ring true. A good punch line does not suffice. With that in mind, I constantly worked on various scenes in order to bring out the underlying truth of the story.

I looked for influence in movies such as *Juno*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, and *Muriel's Wedding*. These movies have characters that are deeply flawed, and deal with painful emotions in an authentic, insightful, and personal way. The universality of these situations and the emotions they evoke allow the viewer to identify with the characters, even at times when their behaviour is less than admirable. Roger Ebert, in his review of *Muriel's Wedding*, said it is “merciless in its portrait of provincial society, and yet has a huge affection for its misfit survivors... The film's good heart keeps it from ever making fun of Muriel, although there are moments that must have been tempting.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a fine line between slapstick and firmly-rooted comedy. I continually straddled this line. I watched all these movies several times while working on the script, and studied them for their comedic tone. The humour in these movies came from the characters' longings, hopes and fears, and was always grounded in reality, which I strove to emulate.

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<sup>7</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Review: Muriel's Wedding,” <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/muriels-wedding-1995>

## Theme

*The wound is a place where light enters you.*

Rumi

In my thesis proposal, I stated that the themes I wished to explore were:

- You can only be happy when you are true to yourself.
- True growth is only achieved by coming to terms with pain.

I originally felt that these themes would only apply to Joni. She was not living an authentic life, but was reluctant to go through the pain of growth. Only by learning to let go of the past, and of her fears, is she able to move on to a more fulfilling life.

As I fleshed out the other characters, I realized they were also reflections of these themes. Richard is working in a job he doesn't like. He has not healed his past with his previous partner, Dawna, which makes him vulnerable when he sees her again. He does not even know what being "true to himself" entails, and so he fluctuates between wanting to be with Joni and with Dawna. In the end, he loses them both.

Sierra is unwilling to take a chance on love; unwilling to risk heartbreak and pain. Wally tells Joni that he has had his heart broken, but he has not learned from this. He uses the post office truck to try to pick up girls for casual encounters, rather than take another chance on real love.

It could be argued that Joni is the only one who embraces the themes, and emerges a better person at the end of the story. The other characters remain stuck to varying degrees, providing a counterpoint to Joni's arc.

## A Note on Obsession

*And now you've lost the only thing that makes you feel alive.*

Keith Urban

In my thesis proposal, I wrote that Joni gives into poor impulses and bad behaviour as a way of coping. As I worked on this script, I realized that this was an understatement. What I was really talking about wasn't just poor impulses—it was obsession.

People struggling with obsessive love “have a painful, all-consuming preoccupation with the real or wished for lover... the target must have rejected them or be unavailable in some way, either physically or emotionally” and “the target's unavailability or rejection must drive them to behave in self-defeating ways.”<sup>8</sup>

But how—and why—does this happen?

Susan Fisher, a biological anthropologist who studies human behaviour, has done imaging on brains of people in love. She found that feelings of love affect neurotransmitter levels, specifically serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. These substances create a “lover's high” which, like a drug, can be addictive.

But according to Fisher, “It is much more than a cocaine high—at least you come down from cocaine. Romantic love is an obsession. It possesses you. You lose your sense of self. You can't stop thinking about another human being. Somebody is camping in your head.... and the obsession can get worse when you've been rejected.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Forward, Susan, and Craig Buck. *Obsessive Love: When it Hurts too Much to Let Go*. New York: Bantam Press, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Fisher, Helen. *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2005, p. 125.



Fisher goes on to say that rejection can result in “all the common signs of drug withdrawal, including depression, crying spells, anxiety, insomnia, loss of appetite or binge eating, irritability, and chronic loneliness. Like all addicts, the (rejected) lover then goes to unhealthy, humiliating, even physical lengths to procure their narcotic.”<sup>10</sup> In this case, the narcotic is their beloved.

Reading the books by Fisher and Forward helped me to answer questions I had been wrestling with: Why couldn’t Joni let go? Why didn’t she just kick him to the curb and get on with her life? The answer is—quite simply—she was unable to.

I shied away from using the term “obsession” for a long time when it came to Joni. That’s because the word is loaded with such negative connotations. Think of the obsessed females often portrayed in the movies. These characters reinforce a dangerous stereotype of the PMS-possessed bitch, hell bent on destruction, with a slew of mental health issues thrown in for good measure.

In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex (Glenn Close) becomes obsessed with Dan (Michael Douglas), a man she had a weekend affair with. When he tries to leave, she attempts suicide by slicing her wrists. She harasses him both at home and at work, pretends to be pregnant, and even resorts to boiling his daughter’s pet rabbit.

*My Super Ex-Girlfriend* takes “going postal” to a whole new level. Jenny (Uma Thurman) wants revenge on her ex, with whom she also had a short relationship, not because she loves him, but because she is already neurotic. After Matt (Luke Wilson) leaves Jenny for another woman, she is consumed with rage and jealousy, using her super powers to throw his car into space, and to attack him and his new love interest with a great white shark. In *Addicted to*

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<sup>10</sup> Fisher, *Why we Love*. p. 183

*Love*, Maggie (Meg Ryan), seething with rage that she has been dumped, spies on her ex and plots her revenge. Amy (Rosamund Pike), in *Gone Girl*, concocts an elaborate plan to frame her husband for her murder.

I did not want to go this route for a number of reasons. For one thing, in these films the female characters are largely unsympathetic. In the movie *Fatal Attraction*, even though the audience might initially empathize with Alex, by the midpoint they have lost all connection with her and are no longer on her side. Also, while Joni is deeply flawed, I don't view her in the same vein as these other women. She is not neurotic or crazy or vindictive; rather she is a woman who has been deeply hurt by love.

Obsessive men are often portrayed in movies in an even harsher light, and for good reason. Men are more likely to stalk, batter and murder their ex-partners. "In one study of American college students, 34 percent of women said they had been followed or harassed by a man they had rejected.... one out of four women are also hit, slapped, shoved, or otherwise physically assaulted by their stalkers...One-third of all American women seeking emergency medical care, one of four women who attempt suicide, and some 20 percent of pregnant women who seek prenatal care have been battered by an intimate partner."<sup>11</sup>

Women are also more likely to be murdered by a lover. Homicide statistics in the United States show that 34% of female victims were killed by an intimate partner, compared to 2.5% of male victims.<sup>12</sup> These cases are often in the news, instilling fear into the hearts of women everywhere. To quote the infamous O. J. Simpson:

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<sup>11</sup> Fisher, *Why We Love*, p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> Sheller, Alissa. "At Least a Third of all Women killed in the U.S. are Killed by Male Partners," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/09/men-killing-women-domesti\\_n\\_5927140.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/09/men-killing-women-domesti_n_5927140.html)

“Let’s say I committed this crime. Even if I did, it would have to have been because I loved her very much, right?”

As Fisher explains, “Historically, many societies have fostered this male predilection to guard a mate. English common law regarded the slaughter of an adulterous wife as understandable, even justified, if done in the heat of passion. Legal traditions in Europe, Asia, Africa, Melanesia, and among American Indians historically also condoned or overlooked murder by a jealous husband. And until the 1970s, in several American states it was lawful to kill an adulterous wife.”<sup>13</sup>

It should be pointed out that even though Joni does seek revenge on Richard, there is no attempt at physical harm. In this way, it is different from the typically male revenge narrative, as well as movies such as *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* that were previously commented upon. Movies about the love-obsessed male are typically thriller or horror flicks. These include *The Boy Next Door*, *Obsessed*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *Fear*, and *Mr. Wrong*.

A notable exception is *A Short Film about Love*, by Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski. This movie tells the story of Tomek (Olaf Lubaszenko), a shy young man who comes to live with his godmother in Warsaw while her son is away, and begins to spy on Magda (Grazyna Szapolowska), the beautiful neighbour across the street.

Ironically, Tomek is a postal worker, and he also uses his job in inappropriate ways. He steals letters written to Marek by her ex-boyfriend. He also sends her notices of non-existent money orders so that she will come down to his postal wicket, and the two will have at least some semblance of human interaction. Tomek believes he is hopelessly in love with Magda, but she shatters his illusions, telling him that there is no such thing as love—only sex. At the end of

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<sup>13</sup> Fisher, *Why We Love*, p. 114

the movie, after Tomek is sexually humiliated by Magda, he storms out of her apartment and attempts suicide. Magda realizes how much Tomek cared for her, and that she is in love with him. She searches hospitals attempting to find him, in many ways becoming the obsessed stalker that Tomek was at the beginning of the film.

The film is not only about obsession, but also a commentary on love. Unlike the anger and wrath of other obsessive male protagonists, Tomek's nature is gentle and naive. The film is quiet, poetic, beautifully rendered, and rich with emotional truth.

## World of the Story

*The only whole heart is a broken one because it lets the light in.*

David J. Wolpe

Some people seek jobs at the post office because it provides decent pay, a steady income, an outdoor work environment, and free time to pursue other endeavours. It is also an environment of ennui. The job can be routine and boring. Letter carriers are all paid the same, regardless of performance. There are no promotions, no incentives, no rewards. Creativity is thwarted and boredom reigns supreme. People get lured in by the perks of working a union job, then get stuck in a rut and are afraid to leave. Injuries are rampant: it's not unusual to see letter carriers downing Tylenol, or strapping on knee or ankle support, before they head out on their routes. The disgruntled postal worker may seem cliché, but as with all clichés, there is truth to it.

The post office is currently undergoing a transition. Internet banking, email, and couriers are cutting down on revenues. Volumes of first class mail are down. As a result, routes are longer and pay is frozen. New letter carriers can work for years before being eligible for benefits, or being assured of full-time employment.

The threat of redundancy at the post office provides context for the script. Joni, herself, feels redundant and is questioning her life. Karen texts and posts information on Facebook, methods of communication that threaten to make the post office obsolete. A teenager that Joni delivers mail to says it's a wonder that anyone uses the post office anymore, and Gavin refers to the service as "snail mail." Andy acts as a counterpoint, because he is a true believer in the value of the mail service. Ben represents the disgruntled postie who seeks an "out" in the only way he can imagine—by trying to get disability.

However, the post office still plays a pertinent role in our lives. Joni mails Richard his personal items, and Richard still relies on the postal service for delivering parcels.

As I worked with the story, the post office began to emerge as a thematic element. When I discovered this, I went back and changed much of the story, striving to contain it, as much as possible, within this world. Richard became the owner of a mail-order business, rather than an accountant, as originally planned. Joni discovered Richard's betrayal when she finds a post card, rather than by Richard confessing. In earlier drafts, Joni sought help from outside sources to extract revenge, but this was changed.

Thus, the post office became an integral part of the plot, and a metaphor for Joni and Richard's relationship. When Joni learns that Richard feels the post office is redundant, she interprets this to be a reflection of his feelings for her. As Richard tries to outmanoeuvre Joni, who has been snooping in his mail, by taking his business online, Joni must become more and more creative, using the post office to first mail him personal items, and then to sabotage his business by replacing trophies with vibrators, and sending them to his customers. At the end of the script, Joni gives Richard a parcel with a toy for Felix the cat, signifying that they have made peace.

# STORYTELLING

## Creative Process

*The hottest love has the coolest end.*

Socrates

Screenwriting gurus often delineate a distinct process to take a writer from seed idea to final draft. The steps along the way may vary but often include: a story synopsis, a beat sheet of major turning points (inciting incident, end of act beats, midpoint and climax), a step outline listing all major story events, a first draft, revisions, more drafts, and then a polish. This makes the process of creating a screenplay seem neat and manageable. Each step builds on the last.

However, for me, screenwriting (like grieving) is a messy thing. I am never content with the beats I have chosen. The story events continue to evolve and change. I'll often write two or three drafts before I realize something isn't working, only to discover that the inciting incident wasn't what I thought it was, or that the climactic moment I had planned should really occur at the mid-point. I use index cards to write scenes on, arranging and rearranging them until my head hurts. I write step outlines and drafts which sometimes build on each other, and sometimes cause earlier versions of the story to come totally undone.

I like to think of this as the "pulling out hair" method of screenwriting. And I think it has some merits. It gives the story room to breathe and grow. There is freedom in allowing the story to settle into a structure that may not be easily discerned when first sitting down to write. Having plot and story points that are set in stone too early in the process can result in a story that is restrictive. As I worked on the script, major changes were made. Some of the more significant ones are described below.

I originally planned for the showdown between Joni and Richard, where she discovers his infidelity, as the opening scene in the script. This occurred at a “welcome home” dinner when he got back from England, as opposed to an anniversary dinner. This event was eventually moved to the first act turning point. This allows a glimpse of Joni’s “ordinary world” and provides context for her relationship with Richard, as well as her goals and dreams. As a result, her feelings about the break-up, and her subsequent actions, seem more understandable. It also allowed for establishing other factors in Joni’s life, such as her job at the post office, her friendship with Sierra, and her relationship with her mother and sister.

Originally, Richard and Joni were not living together. However, this was not the strongest choice. Having Joni live with Richard, and hoping to become engaged, makes her heartbreak more poignant. It also creates a problem for her financially when he moves out.

In earlier drafts other characters were either not fleshed out, or were missing. Sierra was introduced later, as a sounding board for Joni and as a confidante. Each subsequent treatment and then draft added more “meat” to Sierra, as well as other supporting characters such as Karen, Francis, Wally and Ben.

I originally planned for the script to incorporate fantasy elements. I felt that these would reflect Joni’s inner landscape—her longings, hopes and fears. Feedback I received from my adviser convinced me that this made Joni less approachable and relatable, and took away from the reality of the plot.

The entire second half of the script underwent a major revision after I had already written several drafts. In earlier versions Joni seeks revenge by trying to hire the mob to break Richard’s legs. The result was slapstick, and unrelated to theme. After several missteps I devised a way of



Joni extracting revenge that incorporates the post office, and is (hopefully) more humorous and original.

Also in earlier drafts, Joni and Richard get back together, albeit briefly, in the end. Dawna leaves Richard and he finally makes a decision: to commit to Joni. He proposes, thus giving Joni what she thought she wanted, and they move in together again. Then a letter arrives from Dawna while Richard is at work. Joni picks it up and looks at it, but decides not to open it. This was to be the culmination of her arc. She realizes that she doesn't need to know what is in the letter—whether it is Dawna saying goodbye, or wanting to see him again. Something in her relationship with Richard has been irreparably broken in the relationship, so it doesn't matter what the letter contains. But even though she no longer trusts Richard, she can trust herself, and learning this, she is able to move on.

However, that ending was not feasible, given the new revenge plot Joni creates. Also, it seemed like she would be going backward. Joni needed to move on, not to repeat a mistake by giving Richard a second chance, and moving in with him again.

## Structure

*Hearts will never be practical until they are unbreakable.*

The Wizard of Oz

The three-act structure is commonly used in the construction of screenplays. Based on Aristotle's *The Poetics*, the earliest known work of dramatic theory, dating back to 335 BCE, this structure divides story into three parts: beginning, middle, and end. This idea was popularized by Syd Field, an American screenwriting guru who wrote several books on the subject. Field called the three acts as beginning, conflict, and resolution.<sup>14</sup>

Paul Gulino argues that, while an excellent starting point, designing a script using this model can be incredibly difficult. "For most writers, it is the sixty pages of the second act—the true heart of the script—that present the greatest challenges, a bewildering descent into a swamp of seemingly limitless choices, replete with the perils of wrong turns down dead ends and quicksand from which the writer cannot extricate the story."<sup>15</sup>

The sequence approach, which Gulino writes about, is one that he learned while studying at the University of Southern California. This approach employs a series of sequences (usually eight), each approximately eight to fifteen pages in length. Each sequence has its own internal structure (tension, rising action, resolution). Unlike the resolution of a film, the resolution of sequences is only partial, and opens up new problems which must be dealt with in the sequence that follows.

It can be argued that Act 1 in the classic three-act paradigm corresponds to this approach. The inciting incident, or call to action, which usually occurs around pages 10-15, can be seen as

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<sup>14</sup> Field, Syd. *Screenplay*. New York: Bantam Dell, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Gulino, Paul. *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 5

dividing Act 1 into two sections or sequences. The difference between the two approaches is most evident in Act 2. The sequence approach divides this act into four sections—two before the midpoint, and two afterwards.

The sequence approach has its foundations in early Hollywood cinema. Originally, movies were short—between 10 to 15 minutes in length—and made on one reel of film. Movies soon became longer, but there was still only one projector, which meant the projectionist would have to constantly stop and change the reels. The end of each reel would demand some sort of “fade out” or mini-resolution, which would at the same time create problems and future complications designed to ensure the audience would not lose interest.

I structured *Joni Goes Postal* using both models. There is a clear three-act structure. I also used sequences, particularly while navigating Joni’s journey through the second act, breaking it down into four distinct units. I also drew on the works of Blake Snyder, Robert McKee, and Christopher Vogel, who analyzed and applied Joseph Campbell’s theories of the monomyth and the hero’s journey.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd Ed. Novato: New World Library, 2006.

## Structural Breakdown

### ACT 1

#### *Ordinary World (Sequence 1)*

Stories often start with a glimpse of what is called the “ordinary world.” This is the stasis mode, the snapshot of the character’s life before the rug is pulled from under their feet and their lives are irrevocably altered. It provides context for the character’s subsequent growth and change.

In the beginning of the script Joni is living an inauthentic life. She has turned her back on her creativity, and has forged a life that is ultimately unsatisfying, but one that she has convinced herself she wants. She works at a mundane job, and is in a relationship with a man who is unwilling to make a long-term commitment to her. Fear has shaped her choices, although she doesn’t recognize this. She truly loves Richard, even though that love is co-dependent in many ways. Her job at the post office is not fulfilling. She is jealous of her sister, who is married and pregnant, and blind to her own talents and abilities. Although Joni senses there are problems in her life, she is reluctant to acknowledge them.

#### *Inciting Incident*

The inciting incident, or the call to adventure,<sup>17</sup> is an event that precipitates change. It is an event or moment after which nothing will ever be the same again. It could be a major event such as a loved one dying, for example, or a terrorist attack. However, it is often something more subtle, but that will have unforeseen implications in the protagonist’s life. For Joni, it is when

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<sup>17</sup> Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998.

she finds a post card addressed to Richard from his ex-girlfriend, and she begins to suspect he was unfaithful to her.

### ***Refusal of the Call<sup>18</sup> (Sequence 2)***

The inciting incident is a call to action/adventure. What follows is often a refusal of the call. Change is difficult and painful and frightening. It is human nature to resist and rebel. Once life has been thrown out of whack, we tend to respond by kicking and yelling. The “ordinary world” might not have been perfect, but it is often preferable to stepping out of our comfort zone and into the void of the unknown. Blake Snyder refers to this section of a script as the “debate,”<sup>19</sup> when the protagonist, who was thrown for a loop, must decide what to do.

Joni does not want to face what is happening. She has her own vision of her life, and how things should progress. Confronting Richard would push her out of her comfort zone and expose her fears. She hides the post card in a drawer, which is a metaphorical way of hiding the problem. She attempts to question Richard, then becomes upset, and when he asks what is wrong, she lies and says she is emotional because her period is coming on. She decides that she would rather live in denial than risk taking action and the chaos that could ensue.

### ***First Act Turning Point***

The first act ends with a major turning point. The protagonist is sent in a direction they did not expect, or have been constantly avoiding. Usually there is a decision involved—to step into the void—and they finally accept the call to action posed during the inciting incident.

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<sup>18</sup> Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*.

<sup>19</sup> Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat*. Michigan: Sheridan Books, 2005.

In *Joni Goes Postal* this occurs when Richard finds the post card. He and Joni fight, and Joni learns the truth. Richard was unfaithful to her and slept with his ex-girlfriend while he was away at his aunt's funeral in England. This is the culmination of Joni's fears, what she had worked so hard to avoid during the first act.

Joni can no longer keep up her denial. She must respond. She makes the decision (albeit reluctantly) to kick Richard out.

## ACT 2

The first act turning point propels the protagonist into a new world. The protagonist must wrestle to adapt these new circumstances. In *The Wizard of Oz*, this is clearly exemplified. Dorothy is literally transported to a new world—Oz. She struggles to make sense of the world, and to adapt.

Joni's transportation to a new world is less literal, but it is still there. She suddenly finds herself single and her dreams of being married and having a family with Richard have been shattered. The transition, which Joni neither anticipated nor wanted, means that she can no longer live in denial and must undertake the painful journey through grief.

Joni's goal changes after the midpoint. Before this, she wanted to hold on to Richard. Now, she wants to get over him, or at least find a way to cope. She will use many different tactics to accomplish this goal: blaming herself, trying to get on with her life, befriending Richard, and even seeking revenge. None of these tactics work, but it is a process Joni must go through if she is to experience growth and change.

As mentioned previously, I used sequences to break down Act 2 into manageable chunks. Sequences 3 and 4 occur before the midpoint; sequences 5 and 6 occur from the midpoint to the second act turning point.

### *Sequence 3*

Immediately following the break-up, Joni is thrown for a loop. She doesn't know how to cope. She initially becomes angry, throwing dishes, but then her anger is turned inward. She becomes obsessed while watching TV, gives herself a disastrous make over, and lies to her family about her situation. Joni's attempts to feel better are directed against herself. She doesn't lash out at Richard, she lashes out at herself. Her actions are self-sabotaging, and only make her feel worse. It will be an important part of Joni's journey that she learns to express her anger at Richard directly to him.

This section ends when Joni comes home after having dinner at her mother's and finds Richard moving out his stuff. Something inside Joni snaps. She cleans the apartment, scrubbing away her anger and pain, and becomes determined to get over Richard, even though she has no clear idea how to do that.

### *Sequence 4*

At this point in a script, the protagonist often feels that their goal is attainable and within sight. Joni becomes more active and directs her energies outwards. She visits a hair salon, goes to the pub with her co-workers, and works out at a gym. She scours the self-help section of a local book store. She starts to write again, and begins to take control of her life. Even though there are challenges (like being behind on rent), she becomes convinced that she is on the right track, and has what it takes to succeed. She is going to get over Richard. Everything is going to be all right.

But of course, it isn't that easy. Joni's "wins" are tentative and are easily undermined. The reason is that she hasn't completed the grieving process and, at a core level, she hasn't changed.

### ***Midpoint***

The midpoint is another major turning point in the script. In *Joni Goes Postal* this occurs when Joni delivers mail to Richard. He invites her to go for coffee. Joni feels she is sufficiently over him to be "friends." Or, rather, she wants to prove to him that she is over the betrayal.

### ***Sequence 5***

In this sequence, all of the gains Joni has made fall away. Being with Richard evokes old emotions, and she begins to believe they have a future together. This isn't purely delusional on her part. Richard puts his arm around her, and says that the cat misses her.

The sequence ends when Joni realizes that Dawna has come to visit. And, of course, she finds out in the most embarrassing way—she dresses up, bakes cookies, and goes over to Richard's house to cheer him up while he is supposedly working late at night. Implicit in her actions is her desire to get back together with Richard. She is confronted with the realization that there is no future with Richard. He has moved on.

### ***Sequence 6***

This sequence follows the downward spiral of the protagonist. Unlike the third sequence, Joni turns her anger outwards, away from herself, and decides to get revenge on Richard. At first the revenge is directed at Richard on a personal level, damaging his socks and underwear and



returning them in the mail. When she bumps into Richard and Dawna at a coffee shop, and they are talking about her and laughing behind her back, she ups the ante and seeks revenge by destroying his business.

### ***The Low Point***

The low point of the script is the moment where all is lost and the protagonist is at the point of giving up. If the midpoint is an “up” moment for the protagonist, this is the reverse: the realization that they have lost everything, and the actions that they have been doing up until now haven’t been working. Joni fights with her sister, is humiliated, is evicted from her apartment, and loses her job.

### ***Dark Night of the Soul***

This is often a time when the protagonist retreats from the world—to take a breather, lick his or her wounds, experience the darkness that must ultimately come before the hero can learn, grow, and change.

This is the moment of the script when Joni hunkers down in her apartment, alone, the shades drawn, watching TV. On screen is a documentary of the Greylag goose, a bird that, when it loses its mate, often cannot get over its grief. It circles around, mourning plaintively. Sometimes it will mourn for life, and never take another mate. It is at this point that Joni finally comes face-to-face with the reality of her situation.

The low point leads directly into a decision, or a crisis, where the protagonist changes. Joni accomplishes this with the aid of Sierra, who helps her realize she has lost her soul for a man, and who encourages her to get up off the couch and get on with her life.

## ACT 3

Act 3 is what Aristotle calls the “end” of the script, and Syd Field terms the “resolution.”

After Joni experiences her “dark night of the soul,” she begins to walk. She gets a take-out coffee and sits on a bench, pondering her situation. Day breaks, and she sees an 80-year old couple walking together. The woman falters and the man holds out his arm to help her. Their eyes meet. At this moment, Joni realizes what lasting love is. I wanted this to be a quiet moment; one of realization for Joni. This is followed by a decision, when the protagonist changes. Joni gets up off the bench, with a new determination.

### *Climax*

The climactic moment of a script is often thought of as a high-action, intense scene or sequence of events. Joni and Richard’s relationship had been fraught with tension, and Joni acted out in some very inappropriate ways. I wondered how to create a climax that was bigger and more elaborate than Joni’s revenge, sending Richard’s customers vibrators in the mail.

Fortunately, I didn’t need to do this. The climactic moment of the script is actually the climax of Joni and Richard’s relationship. All that comes before leads to this. It is a confrontation, but not a blowout. Joni finally summons up the courage to express her feelings to Richard, and to tell him how much his actions hurt her. She also apologizes. Richard and Joni come to understand each other, and Joni finally finds acceptance and peace.

***Resolution***

I didn't want to end the script in a traditionally upbeat way. I toyed with having Joni find love, either with Wally or with another character. But I think Joni's true growth is in accepting what has happened, and embracing a future filled with unknowns. This resonates more thematically. The script isn't about how love makes us whole, it is about finding wholeness in the incomplete and imperfect situations life throws at us, with or without a partner.

## Characters

*Well since my baby left me, I found a new place to dwell  
I'm down at the end of a lonely street, at Heartbreak Hotel.*

Elvis Presley

## Joni

Joni is the protagonist of the story. She is creative, sensitive, impulsive and insecure. She has a lot of repressed anger just below the surface, but because she wants to be considered a “nice” person she usually suppresses it.

At the beginning of the script, Joni works in a mundane job and is in an unsatisfying relationship. She has given up too much for Richard, including her aspirations of being a writer, and her sense of self. She makes compromises in her hopes of getting what she wants—a life like her sister’s, with a doting husband and a baby on the way. Although Joni thinks this is what she wants, it is not what she needs on a deeper level. She needs to be true to herself, and to honour her own talents and abilities. The journey to this realization is what forms Joni’s character arc.

I worried that audiences may not identify with a character who may, on some levels, appear weak. In early drafts Joni was considerably more passive—the total antithesis to strong, take-no-prisoner heroines in popular movies like *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and *The Hunger Games*. These movies portray women who may have weaknesses and flaws, but who are strong, determined, and kick butt when needed. But Joni is not a character in an action franchise. She is a woman who has lost herself in love. The ability to love is not a weakness; her flaw is that it was directed at the wrong person, someone who could not love her back.

In the first act, Joni doesn’t know whether Richard cheated on her or not. She suspects he has, but is so afraid that this might be true that she avoids asking him. Although this is a choice that Lara Croft would probably never make, I think there is much truth to Joni’s actions. While

men who suspect infidelity might physically harm or threaten their partners, women often react quite differently. “They tend to berate themselves for their own inadequacies and try to lure and seduce instead, hoping to recapture their mate’s affections and rebuild the relationship.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Joni tries to seduce Richard. She ignores the clues, justifies his aloofness, and plans a special anniversary dinner. In other words, she tries too hard.

Joni discovers Richard’s infidelity when she steals a post card that was sent to him by his sex-girlfriend. Stealing mail is illegal, but I hope the audience will identify with Joni, rather than judge her.

One movie that was influential was *Muriel’s Wedding*. In the opening scene, Muriel (Toni Collette) is at a friend’s wedding, hoping to catch the bouquet. She does so, but a bridesmaid remarks that the bouquet should be thrown again, since there is little hope of Muriel ever getting married. Shortly afterward, Muriel is subjected to another humiliating situation when she is arrested for having shoplifted the dress she is wearing. Although the audience immediately realizes that Muriel lies and steals, the scene evokes a deep understanding and empathy for the main character. Part of the reason is that she is in a vulnerable situation, and we see her weaknesses and flaws.

Joni is also in a vulnerable situation at the beginning of the script. Richard has just returned from a trip to England, and she senses something is wrong with the relationship. It soon becomes apparent that he has been unfaithful to her. My hope is to establish a form of recognition with the audience (we all have been hurt) so that the basic truth of Joni’s situation resonates with them, and her actions are understandable.

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<sup>20</sup> Fisher, *Why We Love*, p. 110.

Once Joni discovers that Richard cheated on her, she kicks him out. This is a visceral gut reaction, but it isn't easy. She expresses her doubts about it to Sierra. Did she do the right thing? Joni's conflict is that she still loves Richard, but hates what he did. Joni becomes obsessed. Her obsession is all-consuming, and takes on a life of its own. Her job suffers, and her other relationships become frayed. Many of the things that Joni does are not admirable. She would, in fact, like to take the "high road," turn the other cheek, get on with her things, and circumvent grieving. But life isn't like that. Instead, she finds herself obsessed, overwhelmed and unable to cope.

A point of discussion evolved around the portion of the script where Joni steals from her customers. Joni is experiencing financial problems after Richard moves out, and she is confronted by her landlord because she is behind in her rent. She doesn't want to ask her mother or sister for help, particularly since this would mean confessing that she and Richard broke up. Joni feels she is out of options, and begins to steal small objects from customers, which she takes to a pawn shop in order to get cash.

Stealing things might not get Joni all the money she needs for rent, but it would be a start, and it is a desperate (albeit misdirected) attempt to hold things together when they begin to spiral out of control. Joni would continue stealing, too, if she didn't see Richard and Dawna at the cafe. She eyes the silverware, and considers taking it, but her obsession gets the best of her. She is so upset about seeing them, and having them laugh at her, that her financial worries become inconsequential. She makes a spur-of-the-moment decision: to forgo trying to pay rent, and spend all her money on revenge, buying vibrators to send to Richard's customers.

It was felt that the stealing sequence detracted from the main storyline. One suggestion was that Joni pay for the vibrators using her credit card instead. However, I felt it was important

to keep the sequence intact. One reason was that this would seem implausible; since she is already behind on her rent, it's likely she has already maxed out her credit cards. More importantly, using her own credit card to pay for her revenge purchase does not have the same moral implications.

Stealing represents a pivotal point in Joni's downhill trajectory; she is willing to cross legal and ethical boundaries to get her revenge. Up until now her actions could, to some extent, be justified. Stealing someone else's mail is illegal, but it doesn't have the same gravitas as stealing from unsuspecting customers—customers that trust you. So in this way, she is a betrayer, just like Richard is. She abuses trust. She has truly crossed the line. I don't want to the audience to like Joni's actions. Just the opposite. I want them to cringe. "Oh my God. Don't!" She goes too far, she has truly gone postal, but she doesn't yet realize it.

Once again, I looked to *Muriel's Wedding* as a reference point. As the film progresses, Muriel does really awful things, such as stealing from her parents, for example. But somehow, we still feel for Muriel; we are on her side. We may hate her action, but we don't hate her. Muriel doesn't do these things because she is mean-spirited or a bad person; she does them because she is in pain. That isn't an excuse, but it does make her character more complex and interesting. (However, since Joni returns the items at the end, she is somewhat redeemed.)

Joni spirals downhill until she reaches the low point of the script. She loses not only Richard, but her job and apartment as well. Only then does she find the courage to face Richard, and to begin leading an authentic life. She begins writing again, and embarks on a new path. She has embraced the themes of the movie: that you can only be happy when you are true to yourself, and that true growth can only be achieved by coming to terms with pain.

The script still ends on a positive note. Joni has survived loss and grief, and emerges a bit battered, but with her dignity and autonomy. She faces the future knowing that she is strong and capable, and can handle any curve balls that life throws at her—with or without a man.

In *Legally Blonde*, Elle (Reese Witherspoon) goes to Harvard Law School in an attempt to get her ex-boyfriend back. However, she finds her true calling in life. She learns to respect her own talents and abilities. She also ends up with a really cute guy.

I felt it was important for Joni to remain single at the end of the script. There may be another, more suitable partner down the road, but that isn't the point. Meeting another man in act three would be a cop-out and wouldn't resonate with the theme, which is about knowledge and self-growth. I feel this was a stronger choice, and Joni becomes something of a feminine role model as a result. This may seem strange, given how she was the antithesis of one at the beginning of the movie, but Joni has changed. She doesn't need a guy. If she gets one, that will be great; but if she doesn't, she will still be okay. Learning to be true to herself is reward enough.

## **Richard**

Richard's character went through many incarnations. He remained an enigma for quite a while. Why did he sleep with Dawna? What does he want? Why doesn't he tell Joni right away?

In order to better understand Richard, I first needed to explore his relationship with Dawna. I originally imagined he had a fling with Dawna, and although he felt guilty about it, he would have been happy to keep it a secret and continue his life with Joni, had fate not intervened. Once Joni finds out and confronts him, and they break up, it seemed the logistics of being in different countries made this relationship untenable. I regarded Dawna as a free spirit who was using Richard. She'd always wanted to see Canada, and comes because Richard bought her a



ticket. But the relationship wasn't serious, and in an earlier version, Dawna leaves him for another man.

However I began to realize that, in order for the story to work, they needed to really care for one another. In this incarnation of the script, Dawna and Richard used to date when Richard was a student and living in England. Rather than a brief romance, they were serious about each other, but broke up because they were too young. Both wondered if they had made a mistake; if they were actually meant to be together. They didn't contact each other, assuming the other one was happy and had moved on, but when they meet again in England those feelings are rekindled and they begin to wonder about what might have been. I feel this is a stronger choice, as it makes Joni's doubt and fears more pronounced. Richard actually loved Dawna. Does he still? And what does it mean for Joni?

Richard's betrayal is not a comment on patriarchal culture or male privilege. Nor is Richard a philanderer. He is simply a man who is non-committal and confused. He loves Joni in many ways, but cannot bring himself to marry her. He is not happy in his job, and not totally fulfilled in his relationship. He wonders what life would have been like if he had made other choices. When he sees Dawna in England, it seems he is being offered a second chance to find out.

However, this paralyzes him. He has feelings for both women, and is reluctant to take a stand. He gives mixed messages, and is trying to figure out what he wants. When Joni discovers the post card, and eventually confronts him, it forces the situation. But Richard still vacillates, sticking up for Dawna (after Joni phones her), but wanting to have some sort of a relationship with Joni, although he can't decide whether that is friendship or something more. When Dawna

comes to visit, rather than telling Joni, Richard becomes evasive. He says that he is unavailable because of work, a lie that causes Joni to “lose it” when she discovers them together.

At the end of the script, Richard is thinking of going back to school, but this isn’t definite. Like his break ups (Dawna broke up with him; and Joni kicked him out), his future is still unclear. Thematically, Richard is still not being true to himself. His life is guided by fate and circumstances, rather than by any definitive actions on his part.

Although Richard is the antagonist, he is largely absent from the script after act one. In an earlier draft I wrote scenes of Richard’s life without Joni. He had a best friend that he confided in, and there are scenes of his relationship with Dawna when she came to visit. However, I decided this was not in the best interest of the script. I wanted to tell the story solely from Joni’s point of view. Once the break up occurs, she knows very little about what is going on his life. Events are interpreted through her eyes, as filtered through a screen of despair, hope, and longing. She has no information or insight into his situation other than what he tells her. I felt it would detract from the story if the reader/audience had information that Joni didn’t.

## Supporting Characters

### Sierra

Sierra is the character that is often defined as the “confidante” or “ally”. She points out, in the beginning, that Joni isn’t writing and that she is making too many compromises in her relationship. She is a supportive friend, bringing Joni a notebook as a gift when she thinks Joni is writing, and tries to be supportive when Joni first breaks up with Richard, although she admits she is out of her depth in this respect. She also helps Joni realize, at the end of the script, that although Joni has been betrayed, she doesn’t need to betray herself. In these ways, she is pivotal in helping Joni traverse her character arc.

Although Sierra is Joni’s best friend, they are polar opposite in many respects. Sierra believes that love is over-rated. She cuts through the deception of romance and the blindness of desire, and comes to the conclusion that the only connection she needs is one made of plastic.

Unlike the usual romantic tropes, Sierra has wisdom without love. This may seem unusual, given the genre. However, it resonates with one aspect of the theme. Sierra has made a choice to remain single. She has done a cost/benefit analysis of love, and decided that love comes up short. She sees the pitfalls of romantic relationships, and has chosen a different path. It may not be a conventional choice, but it works for her, so in this way she is true to herself.

However, another aspect of theme is that true growth can only be achieved when coming to terms with pain. Therefore, it can be argued that, since Sierra has not risked love, she has not truly grown. In this way Sierra is a contradictory character. Still, she offers another way of being—one that Joni chooses not to embrace.

## Karen

Karen, Joni's younger sister, is the "perfect woman" that Joni could never be. She is married to a man who nods and smiles at her every word, and she is pregnant. Karen and Ted became engaged after three months; Joni and Richard are nowhere near that stage, even though they have been together for three years.

Although it may seem that Karen also dotes on Ted, it is a case of "she who doth protest too much." Karen strives to present the perfect image to the world. She posts on Facebook that it is her six-month anniversary, and is insulted when Joni doesn't ask her for financial help or relationship advice. She puts on pretenses and wants to be seen as the sister who has everything figured out.

Sibling rivalry drives Karen. She is younger than Joni, but goes out of her way to show how much more "accomplished" she is. She wants to be the centre of attention. When Joni arrives at their mother's house for dinner, distraught, and their mother's attention begins to be focused on her, Karen chooses that moment to reveal she is pregnant.

In Joni's view, everything comes easily to Karen, and she is jealous of her. However, Joni's jealousy is misguided. Karen embodies Joni's ideal life, but she is not fulfilled. She has reached all the landmarks Joni aspired to—being married, having a family. Yet something is missing in her life. She is not living authentically. Her over-enthusiastic reports of her perfect life cover an emptiness within. She remains stuck, and will probably never achieve growth and fulfillment in the way that Joni potentially can. In this way, Karen is the antithesis to the theme.

## **Ted**

Ted is Karen's husband, a man who is steadfast, loyal, and boring as hell.

It was an intentional choice not to give Ted any lines. His relationship with Karen is seen through her (and thus Joni's) eyes. He seems to be the perfect, doting husband, nodding and smiling at Karen's every word. He has no thoughts or opinions of his own. He is as obsessed with the object of his affection as Joni is, is weak and his vision of love is as fuzzy and blurry as hers. Ted represents what Joni's life would be like if she wasn't forced to change.

## **Postal Employees**

### **Wally**

Wally is hunky, in good shape, and seems to take pride in his job. He boasts of souping up his postal truck in order to make good time on his route and get the job done efficiently (although he is only doing it in a misdirected attempt to pick up chicks). Wally has a high school education, and didn't graduate with good grades. For him, the post office is the only life he will ever know, but that's okay; he doesn't aspire to anything else.

Wally's character also underwent many transformations. Initially he was the clueless guy who Tina (another co-worker) was in love with, but Wally didn't realize it. At the end of the script the two finally got together. This provided a counterpoint to Joni and Richard, who began the story together and ended up apart. However, as the script developed, more focus was put on Karen and Ted's relationship and so a Wally/Tina love story no longer seemed relevant. As a result, Tina's role was reduced, and Wally's character underwent a drastic change.

Wally is still clueless when it comes to relationships, but in a different way. He has had his heart broken a time or two, and now has the back of his postal truck converted into a

“hopeful” love nest, complete with bear skin rug and lava lamp. He represents the “hook up” culture; he tries to escape the pain of risking real love again with casual flings, although he has never actually managed to pick up a woman this way.

Yet in many ways Wally is the wise fool. He tells Joni that they both want something more when it comes to relationships, and admits that sex isn’t love. However, he has no idea what that “something else” may be. In this way he is not being true to himself, not because he doesn’t want to be, but because he doesn’t know how.

It has been pointed out that almost all of these characters know nothing about love, yet they all pretty much want it. This is true. Perhaps this is reflective of the human condition. “What is love?” Shakespeare asked. The bard was probably not the first to ponder this question, and I believe most people are still trying to figure it out.

Consider, for example, that 85% of all relationships end in break-ups.<sup>21</sup> The average woman will have her heart broken twice before making a commitment<sup>22</sup>. One survey shows that 93% of college students have been rejected by someone they deeply loved, and 95% had spurned someone in love with them.<sup>23</sup>

Even when making a commitment, the odds are not in our favour. Author and director Dana Adam Shapiro, who wrote the book *You Can Be Right (Or You Can be Married)* (New York: Scribner, 2012) says that only 17% of marriages are happy. He derives this number because 50% of marriages end in divorce, and of the remaining 50%, one-third are happy, one-

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<sup>21</sup> Rosen, Miri. “Cheerful Stat of the Day: 85 Percent of Relationships End in Break Ups,” <http://www.thedatereport.com/dating/trends/cheerful-stat-of-the-day-85-percent-of-relationships-end-in-breakups>

<sup>22</sup> “No One Said Finding The One Would be Easy,” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2532213/No-one-said-finding-The-One-easy-The-average-women-kiss-FIFTEEN-men-enjoy-TWO-long-term-relationships-heart-broken-TWICE.html>

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, Helen, *Why We Love*, p. 153.

third are happy enough, and one-third are unhappy.<sup>24</sup> Love may be a many-splendoured thing, but it seems to be incredibly difficult to find and maintain.

## **Ben**

Ben is a postal worker in his mid-fifties. He is overweight, disgruntled and lazy. He doesn't like his job, and does whatever it takes to have things work in his favour. In many ways, he could be considered the stereotypical postal worker, but I tried to make him a humorous character, rather than simply a cliché.

Ben delivers mail to Richard's workplace. On one level, Ben serves as an unwitting helper, or aide, to Joni. His lackadaisical attitude allows her to snoop in Richard's mail, and to card items to postal outlets that are out of his way.

Ben has no loyalty to the post office, and wants to find a way to get out. For him, this means getting disability and an early pension. He is the character who reveals what happens to a person when they lose passion for anything.

## **Andy**

Andy is the supervisor, and believes in the postal service with messiah-like fervour. "It is important to be sharp" is his motto. He is worried about the problems that the post office is facing, such as downsizing, and makes it his mission to keep the system relevant.

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<sup>24</sup> North, Anna. "Divorce Author: I Think 17% Of Marriages Are Happy," [https://www.buzzfeed.com/annanorth/divorce-author-i-think-17-of-marriages-are-happ?utm\\_term=.wjMJwGq55#.uxeBw3P77](https://www.buzzfeed.com/annanorth/divorce-author-i-think-17-of-marriages-are-happ?utm_term=.wjMJwGq55#.uxeBw3P77)

Andy is like many supervisors at the post office I have known. A number of supervisors were friendly co-workers before “crossing over” to the administrative side. Once there, they adhere to the rules and regulations of the system with rigid determination, as if their lives depend on it. They often “interview” postal workers for any infraction—mis-delivering a letter, delivering a flyer a day early or a day late, being ill, or even wearing shoes that are not the correct colour (black). Interviews can lead to suspensions and threats of dismissal.

Andy represents the old way of doing things, sticking to rules, regulations, and ways of being that are no longer relevant. He doesn’t question the status quo. He is not open to change, much like Joni is at the beginning of the movie.



## CLOSING THOUGHTS

*This is a good sign, having a broken heart. It means we have tried for something.*

Elizabeth Gilbert

As pointed out by Wyndham Wise from his online article “Canadian Romantic Movies, Eh?”, perhaps it is true that “Canadian filmmakers have long maintained an uneasy relationship with romantic films – comedy or drama – at least in their classical form. If the Hollywood version ends by finding stability in couples (and the famous last kiss), the typical Canadian romantic comedy leaves its lovers alone and somehow unfulfilled. They tend to be off-kilter, with only a few actually telling a romantic tale straight up. In a country more famous for producing seriously deranged love stories such as Lynne Stopkewich’s *Kissed* and David Cronenberg’s *Crash*, notable Canadian romantic movies have been few and far between.”<sup>25</sup>

One notable romantic movie is *Take this Waltz*. Written and directed by Sarah Polley, it tells the story of Margot (Michelle Williams), a freelance writer who meets Daniel (Luke Kirby) while on assignment in the Maritimes. They meet again on a flight back to Toronto and discover that they live across the street from each other. The two feel an immediate attraction. The only problem is that Margot is married to Lou (Seth Rogen), and the couple seems relatively happy. But as Margot’s fascination with Daniel increases she begins to question her marriage. At the end of the movie, she leaves Lou for Daniel.

The movie was mostly well received. It garnered a 77% positive rating from Rotten Tomatoes<sup>26</sup> and was named one of the top ten Tribeca Film Festival picks.<sup>27</sup> Roger Ebert gave it

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<sup>25</sup> Wise, Wyndham. “Canadian Romantic Movies, Eh?” <https://www.historicacanada.ca/blog/canadian-romantic-movies-eh/>

<sup>26</sup> Rotten Tomatoes, “Take this Waltz,” [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/take\\_this\\_waltz](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/take_this_waltz)

four out of five stars, stating “this film works a seductive magic, partly because the actors are so persuasive, mostly because it boldly sidesteps practical questions and creates an arthouse version of romantic escapism.”<sup>28</sup> Toronto Star critic Linda Barnard wrote that, “everybody is sweat-slicked from summer heat or desire —and probably both—in Polley’s riotously colourful, Toronto-set romantic drama.”<sup>29</sup>

Personally, I did not like *Take This Waltz*. Margot seems to be terminally depressed, immature, and self-absorbed. The movie was repetitive (I didn’t count the number of times Margot comes up from behind and hugs Lou while he cooks), and the dialogue annoying (the couple speak “baby talk” to each other ad nauseum.) I hated the coincidences: Margot sees Daniel at a historical site in the Maritimes, then he just happens to be on the same flight home as her, just happens to have the seat next to hers, and—oh yeah—just happens to live across the street. There were embarrassingly obvious moments like at the historical site, when Margot flogs a man with a sign “adulterer” around his neck (as if we couldn’t discern the theme of the movie on our own), or when she tells Daniel she hates airports, because she doesn’t like being between things. And in a shower scene at a local pool, a group of naked women who don’t know each other discuss life and love, which seemed totally unrealistic. I’ve swum in lot of pools, and showered in a lot of change rooms, and the only conversation I’ve heard strangers share is along the lines of, “Can I borrow some shampoo?” There were also a lot of unanswered questions: What was Daniel doing at the historical site at the start of the movie? And how can he afford not only a trip to the Maritimes, but an apartment in Toronto, seeing that his job is pulling a

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<sup>27</sup> Fear, David, Joshua Rothkopf and Keith Uhlich, “Top Ten Tribeca Film Festival 2012 Picks” [http://www.timeout.com/newyork/film/top-ten-tribeca-film-festival-picks?package\\_id=42682](http://www.timeout.com/newyork/film/top-ten-tribeca-film-festival-picks?package_id=42682)

<sup>28</sup> Ebert, Roger. “Take This Waltz.” <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/take-this-waltz-2012>

<sup>29</sup> Barnard, Linda. “Take This Waltz: Last dance for Romance,” [https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2012/06/28/take\\_this\\_waltz\\_review\\_last\\_dance\\_for\\_romance.html](https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2012/06/28/take_this_waltz_review_last_dance_for_romance.html)

rickshaw? Although I admired the actors and the writer/director for other works they have done, I found this to be a disappointing film.

Although Margot and Daniel end up together, it is not a happy ending. At the end of the movie, Margot visits Lou after a family crisis (his sister, an alcoholic who has been sober throughout the film, falls off the wagon). Margot and Lou sit on the porch, and Margot asks Lou if he ever thinks about what might have been. For a moment it looks as if she is going to tell Lou she is sorry and that she wants to get back together, but he stops her in her tracks, saying there are some things you just can't undo. There is look of sadness and regret in Margot's eyes. So even though she is not alone at the end of the movie, she is still not satisfied.

In contrast, I don't believe the ending of *Joni Goes Postal* leaves Joni unfulfilled. She has a new job, new insights, and a future full of possibilities. But the story fits the other criteria that Wyndham Wise cites as hallmarks of Canadian romance movies: a bit off-kilter, a romantic tale that isn't told "straight up," and a lover alone at the end.

*Joni Goes Postal* easily fits the Canadian micro-budget realm. My first step is to approach independent filmmakers with the screenplay. I will also reach out through my connections on LinkedIn, and to contacts I have made while studying at York. My goal is to find a producer who will shepherd the script through the various stages of development and into production.

Once I have a producer, we will be able to seek funding sources. There are several available, including Telefilm's Micro-Budget Production Program, the Harold Greenberg Fund, and funding through Canada Council and the B.C. Arts Council. Most of these are not available to screenwriters on their own; a production team must first be in place. There is also the potential to conduct fundraising campaigns on Indiegogo.com and Gofundme.com.

Once the film is complete, I hope to submit it to film festivals. Initially I would like to submit it to larger film festivals such as TIFF. However, if it is not accepted into these, I would like to submit it to genre and underground film festivals. Following that, my aim is to get distribution in Canada and possibly in the United States and other countries. Working on this thesis project has been a journey. It is always interesting, and satisfying, to take the seed of an idea and watch it grow, morph and change. It is also terrifying. Writers are filled with self-doubt. I went through several “dark nights of the soul” along the way.

I was concerned about writing a script based on personal experience, and finding a way to navigate the emotional pitfalls that might entail. I wrestled with letting the characters and plot emerge, rather than imposing the way things “were.” I struggled with finding the emotional truth of the story. I worried that a comedy would not be a “serious” enough script for a thesis project. Despite these fears, this has been a rewarding experience.

I believe I have created a strong script that meets my thesis goals. As I receive feedback from my committee, and, in the future, from producers and story editors in the industry, I will continue to hone and fine-tune the script. Writing is re-writing, so in a sense, even though I am satisfied with what I have accomplished so far, I know the journey is far from over.

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